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The Contributions of Cooperative Reading to a More Respectful Environment for
Students' Learning

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Abstract

This research aimed to understand how reading cooperatively contributed to a more respectful environment. This was a case study focused on a class of 6th grade students (total of 39 participants), who were encouraged to work cooperatively during four reading activities. The instruments of data collection were individual surveys, group reports and teacher observation. Once the process of gaining data commences, it was necessary to include a focus group in order to clarify some concepts used by the respondents. The data was collected and analyzed using a qualitative approach. The study revealed that reading in cooperation contributed positively to a more respectful environment, as students demonstrated gradual attitudinal changes during the time this research was conducted. The findings of this study showed a beneficial impact on students' environment while working together in terms of respect; it was demonstrated that students at the end of the intervention process demonstrated respect towards their classmates opinions looking for strategies to take into account each point of view.

Keywords: cooperative reading strategy, respect, students' environment, teacher support.

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The Contributions of Cooperative Reading to a more Respectful Environment for Students' learning

The Chilean curriculum expects the use of cooperative work among students in order to create an environment in which they can develop self-confidence to control the anxiety produced when they are exposed to the foreign language (Jacobs, 2006). Therefore, combining cross curriculum and content-language goals, may help students to develop interpersonal abilities to benefit the classroom environment.

As this research intended to be achievable in our context, it was necessary to take into account what the Chilean government expects regarding teaching English as a foreign language in terms of cooperative learning and its contributions to promote a respectful environment. For that reason, this project aimed to understand the contributions of cooperative reading strategies through the use of content-objectives based on Communicative Language Approach (CLT), and transversal-objectives proposed by the Ministry of Education.

As CLT is an approach in which conveying the message is the core of communication (Brown, 1994), cooperative work among students is paramount in order to develop not only language skills, but also values such as respect, justice, empathy, etc. Johnson & Johnson (1994) claim that cooperative work helps students to “assist each other, providing academic and personal support” (p.7), additionally, students “develop positive social skill, which encourage the group work to succeed” (p.7) Taking that into account, this research seeks understand how cooperative reading work contribute to a more respectful environment for students' learning.

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The context in which this research was conducted was a 6th grade EFL classroom in the Patricio Mekis school, located in Padre Hurtado. There were 39 students of mixed gender who participate in the study. Most of the students presented difficulties to respectfully express their opinion about ethical dilemmas when disagreeing with other classmates during reading activities. Most of them tended to label their classmates based on their answers using vocabulary as the following: “*stupid*”, “*idiot*”, “*silly*”, among others. That situation contributed negatively to the classroom environment, provoking conflicts among students, and sometimes emotionally affecting some of them since some students did not want to participate anymore during the tasks.

Therefore, this research project attempted to understand the following question: How do cooperative reading strategies contribute to a more respectful environment for students’ learning?

Research Methodology

This research was a case study, which is a type of qualitative research. It aimed at understanding the contributions of cooperative reading strategies in terms of respect in the EFL classroom, specifically in a 6th grade context. Simons (2009) states that “case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’” (p. 21).

The 39 participating students were divided into eight groups: seven groups of five students and one composed by four members. Each group was assigned with a specific number to be identified from 1 to 8 in order to facilitate the process of data analysis. In that sense, it was easier to understand the contributions of cooperative reading per group and the challenges that each group faced. During 10 English modules of 45 minutes each, students had to work

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cooperatively for four different readings: The turtle and the hare, A greedy hippo, The mocking tiger, and The gloomy bee. Those readings were selected not only to practice reading skills, but also they were used to be analysed from an ethical perspective in order to involve students in the process of sharing different viewpoints about a specific topic.

The data collection for the study was based on four main sources used to explore students' attitudes and teacher strategies towards cooperative reading tasks. First, teacher observation notes were collected using a participant observation. In this case the ethnographer used a complete participation since he "becomes a member of the group that is being studied" (DeWalt, DeWalt, 2002, p.24). Additionally, DeWalt & DeWalt (2002) stated that "using participant observation as a method is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study" (p.92). Therefore, this type of instrument was necessary to obtain information about what the teacher was seeing in the classroom in terms of students' attitudes (yelling, insults, hostile attitudes, etc.) towards their classmates (see Appendix A). Therefore, it was focused on registering behavior that students demonstrated when working-cooperatively with defined reading tasks.

Second, individual surveys were used to better understand students' opinions after working cooperatively. These surveys were analyzed from a qualitative perspective being-interpreted from the explanation that students presented in their answers. They were completed after each cooperative reading work activity. The total number of individual surveys analyzed was 159 (see Appendix B). In order to maintain the validity of this instrument, two important factors were considered: (1) it was individual and anonymous to express freely what students felt and (2) it was written in Spanish, because of their low proficiency level in the target language.

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Another important aspect to mention is that each individual survey was aligned with the corresponding group number in order to obtain clear information from each group and facilitate the analysis of the data.

Third, one artifact was considered: 40 group reports were collected, and these were identified with a specific number (see Appendix C). After distributing roles in the groups at the beginning of the cooperative work, the task of completing a report during the whole collaborative reading activity was assigned to the note-taker. In this document, the person in charge had to explain how they worked together. However, in order to gather valid information from this instrument, one aspect was considered: the teacher and students had to negotiate the meaning of “good behavior” and the meaning of “good work”. That was intended to avoid misinterpretations of word-meaning construction.

Finally, one extra tool was necessary to incorporate during the research process, since the data provided information that was not considered at the beginning of the process. The focus group was designed to inquire into two phrases that were mentioned several times by students in the individual survey as well as in the group report. It was important to do it, since it was intended to obtain clear information avoiding subjectivity and misinterpretations. The questions were two in order to clarify what students understood by “*the teacher hear better*” and “*I could not contribute because my classmates did not do what I wanted*” (see appendix D)

The instruments above were useful to triangulate the information obtained, since they represent different viewpoints of the problem emerged in this research. The students’ responses

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and teacher observations were analyzed from a qualitative approach, using thematic coding, since it was intended to look for patterns in order to categorize information.

Research Findings

The most striking finding emerging from the data collected during the research process was related to the importance of mediators in solving conflicts inside the groups. In spite of the fact that each student played a different role, the data showed that mediators were crucial to positively contribute to a more respectful environment, since they reduced the levels of disagreements in groups and lowered interpersonal conflicts..

However, although the data suggested that mediators positively contributed to a more respectful environment by managing conflict situations, it is interesting that equally the characteristics of those students were crucial to determining the type of impact they could have on the group environment. For instance, in two groups reports students expressed the following: *“en el próximo trabajo hay que elegir mejor al mediador porque nuestro compañero “Z” hace que la pelea sea más grande. Elegiremos al compañero “R”, porque él es más tranquilo”* (Group Report 1, October 18th)

Another remarkable finding has to do with the attitudinal changes that students experimented during cooperative reading tasks. From the data collected it was possible to notice some changes in the attitudes that students adopted towards their classmates' opinions. The data collected provided evidence about the eradication of insults and labeling while working in groups at the end of the interventions. For instance, Group 7 mentioned: *“Este es el trabajo uno y no logramos hacer nada porque puro peñábamos, conversamos y dijimos que en el siguiente*

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trabajo tenemos que mejorar y ponernos mejor de acuerdo porque seremos un grupo hasta fin de año y así no se puede". However, the data showed that each group took their own time to change the negative practices.

The data provided evidence that cooperative reading helped students to respect their classmates' opinions, since they started to value each idea as an important contribution to carry out the task. Additionally, during the process of implementing cooperative reading strategies, the data suggested that students learned how to deal with different points of view respecting different perspectives from the same topic. However, it is worth mentioning that it was a gradual process, in which each group developed their own strategies in their own time to deal with the diversity of opinions. At the end of the research, the data suggested various levels of progress. For instance, a student in the second reading mentioned: "*Ahora siento que contribuí porque nos escuchamos, en el primer trabajo solo peleabamos y no hicimos casi nada*" (Individual survey number 2, October 11th). However, a group in the said: "*Al fin logramos ponernos de acuerdo, estamos contentos porque hoy nadie gritó, nos escuchamos y terminamos el trabajo*" (Group Report 4, November 3rd). The evidence showed that while some groups made agreements in the second task without any kind of discussion, other groups did it in the third reading, and others only in the last reading activity.

Additionally, another significant finding emerged from the data gathered is that cooperative reading strategies helped students to develop a sort of autonomy into their groups. The data showed that working readings in cooperation required making agreements about how to develop the task properly in a respectful manner. That is why some groups started looking for strategies to consider each classmate's opinion. For instance, some groups began a process of

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voting for the best answers to be complemented with the other ideas or they simply chose the answers randomly writing them in the order they appeared. This process of making decisions about how to consider all the opinions, contributed to a more respectful environment. One group mentioned in its report: *“como no nos poniamos nunca de acuerdo y puro que peliábamos decidimos votar mejor y la mayoría gana y nadie pelea total están todas las ideas igual”* (Group Report 3, November). Nevertheless, this practice was acquired by some groups, and in spite of the fact that others followed that idea during the next sessions it did not have the same results for each group.

Furthermore, the data collected in this research showed the importance of the teacher's support in the process of working reading cooperatively. The guidance that the teacher provided helped students to understand the attitudinal changes they needed to work in cooperation. The data showed that the teacher, during the first cooperative reading task, had to be in each group at least 10 times to help them to solve conflicts and doubts; however, the interventions of the teacher diminished at the end of the process. As the purpose of this research was to understand the contributions of reading cooperatively in terms of respect in the learning environment, students mentioned that this process was not possible without the support of the teacher involved. For instance, one group mentioned: *“sin la miss no habríamos podido mejorar, al principio no queríamos nada y ella nos conversaba de cómo ponernos de acuerdo para no pelear”* (Group Report 4, November 3rd, 2017)

Conversely to the outcomes that seemed to be positive in many aspects, there was one finding that could be interesting to develop in further research. All the group reports and most of the individual surveys expressed the view that working reading cooperatively helped them to

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understand better the texts. Since these were reading activities implemented from a cooperative perspective, students had the opportunity to share what they understood from the text and complement their own ideas with their classmates. For instance: student “D” claimed *“antes de estar en grupo no entendía nada”* (Individual Survey 3, November 3rd).

Nevertheless, a tension was found between what was stated above and what students with a high language proficiency level mentioned in their individual surveys. The latter felt pressure when working with their classmates who had a poor understanding about the readings. Those students also agreed that they liked helping their classmates, but sometimes it turned frustrating for them. Additionally, the data provided evidence that most of the time those students were the leaders in the group. For instance, a student mentioned: *“A veces me siento presionado con mis compañeros porque no entienden mucho”, “a veces me frustra un poco que mis compañeros no sepan, aunque igual me gusta ayuda”* (Individual Survey, October 11th)

Implications

The findings of this research have considerable implications in the EFL Chilean context. Comparing the outcomes of this research with other investigations, Jacob (2006) states that in order to create positive interdependence among students, they should have a specific role. Nonetheless, this study did not suggest the use of a mediator in the group in case to handle a conflict. Conversely, this research suggests the necessity of incorporating a mediator of conflicts in the group, when students present high levels of disrespect among them. However, the data suggested the importance of establishing certain social characteristics skills in order to have a

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beneficial impact on students' group environment in terms of respectful attitudes towards their classmates.

On the other hand, Krogh, and Sook (2012) concluded in their research the importance of moving EFL teaching from a communicative approach to a content based instruction, in order to develop students' moral dimension by teaching values as a part of a unit called "*Democracy*". Since for them; it is impossible to undertake this work and follow the National curriculum (which is based on Communicative Language Approach). Nonetheless, this research showed its feasibility to be conducted in this classroom in the EFL Chilean context, since it follows what is required by the National English Curriculum. Additionally, it is important to mention that the findings derived from this research provides clear evidence that implementing cooperative work into this context is something possible and shows how this strategy has a positive impact on students' learning environment in terms of respect. Clarken (2015) concluded "if schools wish to develop moral intelligence in their students, they can begin by creating honest, just and caring environments" (p. 6) no matter the approach demanded.

In regard to the similarities of this research with other investigations, it is valuable to mention that teacher support is essential during the process of working readings cooperatively. In McManus & Gettinger, (1996) concluded in their research, when learners are not involved in a collaborative context, they need to be carefully guided during the process of working together. Likewise, Jacob (2006) expressed the perspective that teachers should be a facilitator in the process of working together, to ensure a positive impact on students learning. Therefore, this finding suggests the necessity of considering the teacher as the core of contributing to a more respectful environment.

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Furthermore, another important implication concerning this study had to do with the development of autonomy that some students presented in the classroom during cooperative readings, contributing at the same time, to a more respectful environment. Some of the students showed the capacity of making their own decisions to resolve in a more democratic manner the variety of opinions into their groups, looking for strategies to avoid complaining about finding only one answer, such as voting in order to respect each students' viewpoint. Jacob (2006) stated that to be autonomous learners implies the power of choosing what and how. In this case the data showed that some students achieved the power to decide how they could respect their classmates' opinion by considering their contributions to carry out the task assigned.

Finally, for further research it would be paramount to understand how to implement cooperative reading strategies without taking for granted the individual characteristics of students. That is due to the fact that the last finding in which students with a high proficiency level in the target language, mentioned their displeasure to work with lower proficiency students, while the latter liked to do it. It is a relevant outcome to be developed, since teaching should be a fair practice to ensure the individual development of students. In that sense, Kagan & Kegan (1998) proposed the use of different tasks to embrace a wide range of intelligences, since those students with lower proficiency level could be effective in other types of works. Having that in mind, the implementation of cooperative learning will be suitable for everyone in the classroom.

Limitations of This Study

As the focus of this study was on understanding how cooperative reading strategies contributed to a more respectful environment, time was the most significant limitation since

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looking for further developments in any type of research is required more than five weeks to obtain valid and reliable conclusions.

On the other hand, in spite of the fact that students and the teacher agreed on the concept: “contribution”, it was noticeable that some students did not understand what it meant. Therefore, there was a minimum of students who responded something totally different from what it was expected. Consequently, for further research will be necessary to carefully design the tools for gathering information choosing appropriate language for students.

Conclusion

It is concluded that cooperative reading strategies have a significant impact on the students’ environment in this particular context. The implementation of cooperative reading positively contributes to a more respectful environment, since most of the students understood the importance of taking into account each classmate’s opinion in order to succeed in the assigned tasks. Additionally, this research demonstrated its feasibility to be applied in the Chilean context, because it followed what was stated in the National Curriculum.

However, it is suggested to bear in mind three main aspects: first, the important role that mediators play in the cooperative work avoiding conflicts. Second, the teacher support as the core of guiding this process of working together. Third, the contribution of developing learners’ autonomy to make decisions regarding how to complement their viewpoints in the group.

Finally, this research project suggests developing further research to deal with the problem of pressure and frustration that students with high language proficiency level felt when working with lower students.

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Appendix B
Students Surveys

Group Number:

¿Me sentí escuchado? ¿De qué forma?

¿Sentí que fui una contribución a mi grupo? ¿De qué forma?

¿Permití a mis compañeros contribuir? ¿Cómo?

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How was our work? Why? (¿Cómo estuvo nuestro trabajo? ¿Por qué?)

Our Strengthens (Nuestras fortalezas)

Our weaknesses (Nuestras debilidades)

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Our commitments: (Nuestros compromisos)

Note-taker signature: _____ Teacher Signature:

Date: _____.

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Appendix D

Focus Group

1.- ¿A qué se refieren con “el professor escucha mejor” cuando estamos en grupos?

2.- ¿Qué significa contribuir para ustedes?